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Theorising the Women's Liberation Movement *as* cultural heritage

The recent interest in documenting and re-evaluating the histories of the UK Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has produced a number of significant and multifaceted appraisals of the movement. The vast majority of these have emerged from within feminist communities of interest wishing to preserve, organize and collect the histories of the movement because they risk being forgotten. This article attempts to understand the contemporary recovery and dissemination of feminist legacies as examples of cultural heritage rather than 'history' per se. It examines how filtering historical information through the lens of heritage can offer different tools for representation as well as creating alternative social and cultural *relationships* with the legacies of the WLM. This article draws upon my practice as a curator and custodian of feminist histories, as well as relevant theoretical literature. I argue that utilizing practices and theories aligned with heritage can help articulate a politics of transmission that is essential for the longevity and sustainability of both feminist cultural heritage and feminist histories.

Keywords: *Feminist archives, Heritage, Transmission, Organisation, Selection*

The recent interest in documenting and re-evaluating the histories of the UK Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has produced a number of significant and multifaceted appraisals of the movement. From academic monographs,¹ TV programmes,² academic conferences, oral history dialogues,³ exhibitions, digital archives, activist events, witness seminars, radio shows, the establishment of networks⁴ and film screenings⁵; to claims within parts of the left-leaning media that there is a widespread resurgence in contemporary feminist activism, the WLM is often used as touchstone and inspiration for feminist activism across history.⁶ Large oral history initiatives such as the *Heart of the Race* project collected by the Black Cultural Archives (2009-2010), and *Sisterhood & After*, housed at the British Library (launched 2013), are complemented by smaller initiatives that have captured the local distinctiveness of the movement(s), as well as examining how women engaged with a range of cultural forms, such as music, screen printing and theatre.⁷ Thanks to these varied initiatives there is now an abundance of diverse memory resources circulating both within physical and digital archives that interpret the stories of feminist activism during the WLM and Black Women's Movement.

What is significant about these publicly orientated projects is that they often make an attempt to foreground the experiences of, and archive materials produced by, women who were active in the movements. This suggests that the impetus to collect and take care of WLM histories does not arise from a specifically academic desire to *historicise* the movement, but to ensure that its different viewpoints are recorded, and increasingly through the use of digital technologies, disseminated. While it may be tempting to see these gathered memory resources within the category of historical evidence alone, I want to examine this material as examples of *feminist cultural heritage*. In doing so, I examine whether different kinds of knowledge and value are expressed if the eventful archives of the WLM are treated *as* heritage, and how this relates to the figuration of political generations, transmission processes and community formations yet to be explicitly articulated within feminism. If the heritage dimension of the material collected is not attended to, will this overlook how history

and tradition are invoked and recovered within feminist political communities across different historical times? How do communities of practice (those communities that practice feminist activities, ideas and culture) mobilize traditions in order to sustain feminist political action, ideas and identities? Before exploring these questions in detail, I begin by offering some very schematic distinctions between history and heritage. I then discuss the role of heritage and tradition within the WLM before reflecting on my own curatorial practice. I conclude the article by discussing the transmission of feminism's archive as a practice of organization, selection and emphasis, foregrounding material from the Black feminist movement in the analysis.

Some brief distinctions between heritage and history

History involves a series of erasures, emendations and amalgamations [...] history splinters and divides what in the original may have presented itself as whole, abstracting here a nugget of descriptive detail, there a memorable scene. [...] History composites. It integrates what in the original may have been divergent, synthesizes different classes of information, [...] it creates a consecutive narrative out of fragments, imposing order on chaos, and producing images far clearer than reality could be.⁸

There is, really, no such thing as heritage.⁹

Heritage is not given, it is made and so is, unavoidably, an ethical enterprise.¹⁰

Placing heritage and history side-by-side will inevitably invite comparison between two interpretative practices that often draw upon the same archival source material. In this article I want to tease out the different uses of feminist archives when they are framed as history or heritage. After all, how historians and heritage practitioners utilize the feminist archive, as well as how material is framed for people in everyday life *as* history or heritage can vary. History, as glossed by Raphael Samuel above, risks a very particular kind of interpretative distortion: *written* by the historian, whose ideal stance is to survey archival evidence and draw from it objective conclusions, history can transform the chaos of life into neat summary, assimilating dis-synchronous details through an act of story telling. Such narrative representations are, for Hayden White, 'marked by a desire for a kind of order and fullness in an account of reality', a 'completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience.'¹¹ While I do hope the reader will forgive what is an ungenerous caricature of the historian's practice, the idea that history is a professional discipline comprised of certain orthodoxies, methodologies and linear modes of transmission, located predominantly in narrative and the written word, remain resilient despite challenges presented by postmodern, post-structuralist and other deconstructive approaches.

Less familiar perhaps to readers of this journal, and indeed the feminist theoretical community in general, are conceptions of heritage. Laurajane Smith argues that there is no such *thing* as heritage, only a complex set of social processes through which objects, buildings, music, storytelling, landscapes, dance and so forth accrue cultural value, and subsequently establish 'a measure of social reverence.'¹² This is echoed in David Harvey's claim that heritage is always made (and therefore always open to

contestation) in its iterations across historical time. These writers, and many other contributors to the field, theorize heritage as an active process through which communities make sense of their place and time in the world through a rootedness within selected traditions. Often this conception of tradition, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, has been narrow in scope, localized within the boundaries of the nation state, or aligned with ethnic identities and other forms of identity tied to a place or location. This conception of heritage corresponds with what Smith calls the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD),' which 'asserts the legitimacy of expertise,' a 'dominant and professional discourse [which] is institutionalized within public policy, heritage statutes, agencies and amenity societies.'¹³ Yet, as both Smith and Harvey note, although ideas such as the AHD are normative, they are not the only way to conceptualise heritage.

A crucial argument in this paper is that there can be such a thing as feminist cultural heritage, or, following Smith, a process of ascribing *heritage value* to feminist activities that have occurred across history. This process is often an unofficial, grassroots affair that challenges the tenants of the AHD in the sense that it is rarely officially sanctioned or requires professional validation. I situate this claim in relation to recent critical reflections on feminist histories within which it is possible to detect an emerging consciousness about feminist heritage. Kate Eichorn has argued, for example, that imagining the possibility of feminist tradition emerges from a 'relationship to time and history that has only recently become possible.' It is something that 'one can only experience after one is both certain that they have history (perhaps, only after one begins to feel the weight of such a history and at least some responsibility for its preservation).'¹⁴ Margaretta Jolly has outlined interpretative practices that 'contribute to our respect for feminism as a maker of community.'¹⁵ Such observations are noteworthy because feminism is often perceived as a political ideology, a social movement or a set of diverse methodological approaches. Feminism is less often thought of in terms of how it creates forms of sociality, cultural practices and (im)material culture that may aspire to something akin to 'tradition.'¹⁶ Generally, people are not rooted within feminism in everyday sociality; it is something that must be discovered, that one must become.¹⁷ This can be extended to the conception of feminist cultural heritage and tradition: it is an idea that must be (re)claimed by scholars, activists, journalists, artist and practitioners; its value must be carved out, demonstrated and argued for. As Eyerman and Jamison have made clear, heritage and tradition, particularly when enshrined in participatory cultural forms such as music, storytelling and dance, can be key parts of political struggle when they are selected and mobilised by communities.¹⁸ Heritage, understood in this unofficial sense and without recourse to, or recuperation by the AHD, can be a key nexus where identities, values and ideas are negotiated and transmitted. Such acts of negotiation and creativity were also a key part of the WLM in its own time, as we shall see below.

Heritage and tradition within the WLM

Acts of cultural recovery were a key part of activist practices in the WLM. They populated feminist media stories, political meetings, were the subject of conferences and defined the purpose of activist groups. The most enduring example of this remains the fondly remembered Virago Modern Classics series that published books by women writers that had, by the 1970s, 'gone out of print'.¹⁹

Furthermore, as Jalna Hanmer has reflected, early in the WLM

women began to understand how the loss of knowledge of earlier women's struggles and demands is a major way of securing the social and personal subordination of women. These ideas led to women collecting, preserving and making available to other women a map, a guide, for future generations of women so that women who did not share a particular moment in time may have access to it. Early materials were turned out on duplicators, often indistinct or blurred, and circulated to small numbers through women-only publications.²⁰

The idea of a 'women's culture,' where women's interests, practices, aesthetics and values were foregrounded, gained particular traction among some women's liberation music makers. Consider this excerpt taken from an A4 pamphlet-magazine *Women and Music* (1978) that indicates how strong emotional attachments to *the practice* of rediscovering cultural traditions circulated among certain parts of the women's movement.

These songs are one way of *partially rediscovering* our *hidden history*. If art is about trying to express the truth as we see it, *making sense and shape out of the chaos and complexity and trying to make us more whole as people in a society that fragments, stereotypes and divides us*, then the best of the tradition can be said to stand alongside women artists. *The creators of these songs were our ancestors* – all those grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers forced into service or the mills and *finding comfort* in the old and new popular songs.
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The rediscovery of feminist or female-centred cultural traditions is presented here as a key technique through which fragmented social selves become whole and integrated through alignment with ancestral voices. The significance of culture as a form of social or community 'glue' is discernible here, particularly how songs act as evidence of the existence of women's social and political agency in different historical times. It is a clear and striking articulation of how heritage, understood as a rootedness within selected traditions, was used to furnish identities with strength and meaning, identities that were essentially 'cut off' without the imagining of tradition. Such practices do of course risk romanticizing cultural traditions, misrecognizing them perhaps as authentic expressions of a bygone women's culture. Such a critique has great validity, but it does not help us understand how heritage was *used* in the WLM, and, perhaps, feminist social movements more widely. For the important aspect to note is how the authors of this text are 'finding comfort' in tradition, which underlines again the social function of heritage as a way to root and align identities with historical relations that make activist work coherent, purposeful and meaningful.

A strong foothold for women's liberationists was of course found in the recent history of the suffrage movement. Women's history featured strongly in feminist magazines such as *Spare Rib*, as Krista Cowman explains: the UK-feminist 'newstand' magazine 'published history from the outset, reflecting the broader desire of second-wave feminism to historicize its activity.'²² While 'the magazine connected feminist historians to a non-academic readership,' the demand for 'attractive copy' meant the

‘complex nuances of historical research were not easily conveyed in the small space of a few columns.’²³ This led to the

retention of key aspects of the non-feminist narrative (a small number of charismatic leaders; a campaign largely restricted to London) within features whose stated aim was to challenge [these narratives] says much about the pervasive nature of mainstream history. With limited resources in the form of available primary material, it was hard to escape existing paradigms.²⁴

Such narrative coherencies are not necessarily the product of non-feminist narratives alone. Laura Mayhall has written, for example, about how the militant activist practices of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) came to dominate the cultural memory of the suffrage movement. This was achieved through a myopic ‘suffragette spirit,’ the ‘self-conscious creation of a small group of former suffragettes in the 1920s and 1930s’ which ‘enshrined a narrative of authentic suffrage militancy that has remained surprisingly coherent since.’²⁵ June Purvis has also argued that the 1970s BBC suffrage drama *Shoulder to Shoulder*, a key contact point with feminist histories for women and young girls in the early 1970s, was strongly influenced by Sylvia Pankhurst’s autobiography *The Suffrage Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*, and consequently emphasised particular historical narratives.²⁶ Cowman’s article reminds us of the ‘fragility of feminist knowledge and the speed with which critical events could be forgotten.’²⁷ She explains that even when diverse accounts of the suffrage movement were published, ‘such texts were so marginalized that they could be overlooked even within the context of feminist research.’²⁸ Even published books can drop out of print and commerce. This helps us to think about the circulation of feminism’s archive in very concrete, pragmatic terms, although as Cowman’s work instructs us, the existence of a book is not enough for it to be adopted within the context of research and, consequently, knowledge. To be operational the artefact must be accessed, used and placed within circuits of reference and association. It must be transmitted as a singularity rather than subsumed into dominant narratives that are, as we have seen, remarkably resilient.

The digitised twenty-first century is of course a markedly different context for accessing, archiving and publishing historical information, and is characterised by a far more familiar everyday relationship to ‘the archive.’²⁹ This does not mean, however, that feminist knowledge, and feminism’s archives, is any less marginal or fragile.³⁰ Those wishing to seek out the heritages of the WLM will benefit from the significant amount of memory resources collected in feminist archives and libraries in the sense that there is simply a greater volume of material available in 2015 compared with 1967 or even 1989 (to select some arbitrary dates). Yet the diversity of these archives, the singular artefacts they contain, must be continually re-affirmed and transmitted if they are to achieve consistency and value. How we interact with and represent archival resources are always active processes that engender relationships with, and points of access to, the transmitted material. As we shall see below, the modes of presentation available within a heritage context, when appropriated by grassroots activists seeking to open up different kinds of relationships with and knowledge about feminist archives, offers a different kind of transmission trajectory to the composite historical narrative—the kind that has gained concentration via repetition and familiarity, as outlined by Cowman, Mayhall and Purvis.

Heritage and re-presentation

In an exhibition the range of historical information, the materiality and diversity of individual artifacts can be foregrounded to audiences. The curator does of course *select* which material is put on display and which is not, but they can also help visitors turn toward a diversity of artifacts and materials in particular ways. Such an approach was key to my own curatorial work presenting what I perceived, and experienced to be, the marginalized cultural histories of the WLM. By ‘cultural histories’ I refer to the cultural production of women’s movements (writing, theatre, music, imagery and so forth), but also, as Gail Lewis described in relation to her participation in the Black Women’s Movement,

not just that. I mean something about a kind of, our culture of being, how we related to each other, were we just there really to always do organising and politics or should we also being doing something about providing a space in which we can kind of meet together with like minded people in more recreational sociality, that was important because this was also part of consciousness raising in a way.³¹

Across two Heritage Lottery Funded exhibitions, *Sistershow Revisited: Feminism in Bristol, 1973-1975* (2010) and *Music & Liberation* (2012) and the creation of an non-funded online digital archive, the *Women’s Liberation Music Archive* (2010 -), my aim was to create spaces where audiences could encounter archive materials that presented the diversity and multiplicity of WLM activism, particularly in relation to music, theatre and the feminist ‘world-making’ activities attached to such practices. As a curator I had no professional training. I gained rudimentary curatorial skills from working as a volunteer in a people’s history museum, and my impetus to construct exhibitions emerged from an enabling do it yourself/ punk context that I was immersed in. Everything else about curating I learnt through critical observation and books—no one authorized me to act. Although utilizing a form normatively associated with authoritative heritage practices these two exhibitions were grassroots, activist projects as much as they were heritage ones. Indeed, these works highlight the key role that heritage performs within contemporary feminist activism.

The exhibitions were attempts to render certain aspects of feminist histories known, but also create points of identification for visitors with those histories. My aim was to create a context where people could forge relationships with these materials, perhaps ‘using’ them as supports for their identities and wider sense of being in the world as a feminist. The exhibition form was I felt as ideal container for enabling such modes of engagement and identification, a ‘politicised practice of opening up relationality.’³² My curatorial practice was further influenced by the work of Frank Ankersmit, specifically the idea of creating a context where ‘historical experience’ could emerge outside the flat confines of historical representation.³³ A historical experience is defined by Ankersmit as one that engenders a mundane sense of temporal collapse, so, quite literally the sense that material from Other historical times intrude into and co-exist in the now. For Ankersmit, historical experiences become possible through proximity with and exposure to everyday ephemera such as scrawled notebooks, receipts, invoices or letters. Such items formed a significant part of the material displayed in *Sistershow Revisited* and *Music & Liberation*. Ephemera can emit historical sensations, appearing as ‘indestructible, uncannily close, and-despite [their]

closeness and [their] durability—[they are] utterly impossible to conserve in “representations.””³⁴ A crucial part of identifying with the materials on display was then about creating a context where visitors could, if they were open to it, form sensory relationships with the artefacts. This was achieved through the artefact’s mundane intrusion into, and co-existent mingling within, the historical scene visitors and artefacts co-occupied in the exhibition. One simple display tactic in this regard was to place artefacts confrontationally within the exhibition space, rarely behind glass or barrier, often to enable visitors’ movement around it, allowing them to look at the displayed object from different angles. I also included photocopies of key documents within exhibitions that visitors could pick up, read and perhaps ‘steal’ if they felt impelled to, as well as other opportunities to interact with what was displayed, such as turning pages of publications, pressing play on tape decks and selecting oral histories to listen to or watch on digital playback devices. These subtle, low-financed techniques were deployed to involve the visitor in what was happening within the exhibition, a rare opportunity to feel literally close to the displayed artefacts.

I was keen to accentuate within my own curatorial practice the way exhibitions *can* foreground diverse voices, artifacts and perspectives. Such a technique differs from the historian’s compressed narrative that is premised within a dynamic that raises one voice—the historian’s—above others—the artifacts. I wanted to create a public transmission context where the rough multiplicity of feminist archive materials could be exposed to visitors as an initial point of contact. I was keen to empower visitors with a range of historical evidence so they could authorize their own interpretations of events. To assume that my role as mediator and curator was not without bias or intention, or that I did not represent the material in any way and point visitors towards this or that interpretation, would of course be a remarkably un-reflexive claim. I understand my influence was there as curator, as *carer* for those artifacts. Nevertheless I wanted to ensure that my own authorial voice was minimized. I perceived my role within the exhibitions as *selector* and *arranger* of the artifacts, and I will go on to discuss this practice of selection in more detail later in this article. My aim was enable visitors’ access to different voices and perspectives, utilizing the multi-medial forum of exhibitions that offer a platform for text, images, film, video, ephemera, objects and audio (including music and oral histories) to *co-exist* in their singularity. This method seemed to allow the greatest degree of self-representation for the material displayed, a self-representation I deemed necessary because the political activities of the WLM and ‘70s feminism’ have been caught within peculiar cycles of identification and denigration within the academic feminist project, as Clare Hemmings’ work has pointedly shown.³⁵ Iris van der Tuin and myself have both discussed how such dynamics have undermined the feminist archive as a site of epistemic value; we have both been shaped by the ambivalence of whether or not there is anything worth knowing about feminist histories. Yet, equally, we have both been energized through our engagements with the archive.³⁶ Popular culture has also been fairly unforgiving to the WLM, from the backlash dynamics outlined by Susan Faludi to postfeminist masquerades that nurture the ‘spectral dimensions’³⁷ of feminism, that call into question its relevance as a political practice and form of identification.

This was another reason to engender identification and recognition of the diverse forms of feminist activism from the WLM within the exhibitions: to challenge generic

representations and claims about a social movement that was incredibly diverse strategically, culturally and politically. Within *Music & Liberation* I deliberately eschewed chronological organisation in my arrangement of the materials. This was, in part, hostility to imposing a straight, linear unfolding idea of historical time onto the artifacts. I did not want to temporalise the materials as belonging to ‘the 1970s’ or ‘1980s’ because, quite literally, in their uncannily close manifestations, their material existence endures in the 21st century, and the ideas, sounds, images and energies of the historical actions are re-enacted through the exhibition, releasing their temporal-historical differences.³⁸ Removing affective biases attached to blanket temporalisation, which produces a kind of knowledge about historical phenomena that is not knowledge but performs itself as such,³⁹ also informed the refusal to impose a pre-given temporal framework. I instead chose to use themes, such as ‘Professional or Amateur’, ‘Distribution’ or ‘What Makes Music Feminist?’ in order to highlight key themes and strategies deployed by feminist music makers, while posing questions about their activities to aid interpretation.

<<< Insert Figure 1, Exhibition attendee reads from magazine on display; Figure 2, Photocopies from Black Cultural Archives with audio cassette player; Figure 3, drum, shoes and socks from the York Street Band; Figure 4, Jam Today Income and Expenditure Book (displayed on a music stand). All images from *Music & Liberation* at the Butetown History & Arts Centre, Cardiff, September 2012. Copyright Eva Megias >>>

While I have little empirical evidence about whether or not I was successful in realising my theoretical aims in *Music & Liberation* and *Sistershow Revisited*, this discussion should make it clear how I sought to appropriate the exhibition form in order to activate the transmission of feminism’s marginal cultural histories. As a curator my aim was to make selections from existing archival material and emphasise them in an interpretative context that enabled a range of multiple voices and materials to co-exist: the exhibition. Understood in this way the exhibition, as a mode of transmission, transmits materials from the feminist archive differently to the written historical narrative that, by the necessity of its technical form, compresses multiple perspectives and foregrounds the authorial voice of the historian. My appropriation of heritage techniques to transmit the artefacts from the feminist archive at a particular historical time was in this sense strategic; it aimed to engender a context where identification, sensation and valuation could occur in relation to a collection of archive materials that remained invisible and dis-identified within early 21st century feminism. In the final section of this paper I will further elaborate on how the practice of selection can be a useful way to understand subsequent practices that transmit feminism’s rich archives.

Heritage: organisation, selection and emphasis

How then can the cultural heritage of the WLM and Black Women’s Movement be mobilised through practices that organise the material (through making an archive or by cataloguing an existing collection in more detail), selection (isolating particular items from a collection for the purposes of interpretation) and emphasis (foregrounding certain items over others in order to accentuate ‘what is, importantly, already there’⁴⁰)? In what follows I outline transmission as an active practice of artificial selection. These observations draw on the work of Bernard Stiegler who

argues that the ‘human’ is supported by external (artificial) prosthesis, mnemotechnical forms—and in our case the material stored in feminist archives—that compose our consciousness and wider orientation in the world. Stiegler’s work makes clear that ‘we’ are the product of what we inherit, even as we can change that inheritance through our actions.⁴¹ There is no human, in other words, outside whatever mnemotechnical context conditions it. While Stiegler’s work consistently highlights the vulnerability of ‘the human’ in an era where consciousness is subject to sophisticated forms of control and manipulation by the marketing forces of globalised capital,⁴² I am re-purposing his insight by focusing on the role artificial selection can perform in the transmission of feminist archives.

My suggestion is that new practices, theoretical and tangible, need to be developed in order to transmit feminism’s archives and understand what is politically at stake in those transmission processes. This is important if we want understandings of the WLM to be produced through access to a diverse range of artefacts and perspectives which emerged from within the movement rather than, say, a single authorial voice, be it the professional historian or a well-known participant. Transmission here is understood as a practice that everyone can potentially participate in. Not everyone, of course, has the cultural power or resources to transmit information with duration, amplitude or influence. For example, we may share our knowledge of feminist archives with a small group of friends, but that act of transmission may only reverberate within a fairly closed circle. If the same materials are displayed as part of an exhibition at a well-respected gallery, the extensiveness of the transmission will be increased, perhaps even solidified due to lingering values of taste and distinction which structure the cultural field.⁴³ Transmission can therefore be thought of as a practice of scale and depth that ultimately everyone has responsibility for because all human life is composed by its inheritances: We are transmitting all the time anyway, whether we consciously know it or not. Why not, then, render transmission a more deliberate process through acts of artificial selection?

My understanding of transmission, then, is as a form of activism that can *potentially* activate feminist archives. A politics of transmission can help address the extent legacies are encountered and become part of a ‘common’ feminist cultural heritage. As Claire Colebrook explains, drawing on Stiegler’s philosophy, ‘the greater the difference of the archive the more complex the encounters among individuals with the past and each other.’⁴⁴ What then would it mean if Black feminist activist traditions present in grassroots publications such as *FOWAAD! Mukti* and *Outwrite* were widely and consistently transmitted in the foreground, rather than pushed to the periphery. What if these materials were repeatedly used as sources for documentaries, clip art, in lessons, essays, articles, books and exhibitions? These publications do of course exist in collections within feminist archives, but they are not necessarily organised *as coherent tradition* outside of what has been ascribed to them by Black feminist and heritage communities.⁴⁵ This is not to denigrate the work of those working in organisations such as the Black Cultural Archives who have contributed significant interventions in this area. Projects such as the Heart of the Race oral history project, conducted in 2009, are an invaluable record of these activist histories, the collection of these histories were an immense endeavour. My point is that the transmission of this material needs to be actively practiced across all feminist communities so that a wide range of scholars, activists, broadcasters and curators cite and utilize this material so it accrues not only heritage, but, crucially, epistemic value. As Yula Burin

and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski recently noted, ‘as far as we are aware, there is not a black British feminist herstory and/or archive association, and this is urgently needed.’⁴⁶ As such, these memory resources can, like much feminist heritage, be fragmented and elliptical, which makes them harder to transmit. Such dislocation is not necessarily conscious or deliberate. It is part of a complex process where value is ascribed and resources allocated, a process that is however entangled within institutional and structural forms of racism and misogyny that shape what is perceived as valuable (culturally, economically, epistemically).

Consider the following example from my experience of my volunteer work as trustee of the Feminist Archive South, Bristol, which should underline the current haphazard organisation of the Black feminist tradition within feminist archives. In our collection of audiocassette tapes there is a single copy of Wilmette Brown, author of *Black Women and the Peace Movement*, delivering a lecture at St Werburghs community centre, Bristol, in 1984. The recording was migrated to a 24 bit/ 96 kHz digital WAV file in 2014 and is now available for consultation in the archive.⁴⁷ It is hard to specify when the tape was last played prior to that transfer, or how many people have heard it. To organise this rare recording—to connect it with wider Black feminist traditions—it needs to be discoverable through archival practices such as metadata, categorisation and tagging. If this does not happen, despite being housed in a feminist archive (think also of all those items that are *not* in the feminist archive) the item is subsumed into an undifferentiated mass of information that is only found by accident (as indeed I did, as I was looking through a box that had been called up from store—I was not looking for the tape). Its existence as a memory resource needs to be promoted via community knowledge; it needs to be consulted and emphasised. As we noted at the start of this article, heritage is an ethical struggle, a process of attributing value to artefacts. Such practices therefore needs to be attentive to the marginalisation and truncation of transmitted voices across historical time, due to structural factors, lack of finance and appropriate technological infrastructure, and redress them through acts of transmission. To change the historical record, in other words, you must transmit the historical record.

<<< Insert Figure 5. 18-Channel Snapshot of the Transmissive Field, drawing by the author >>>

Let me now use an analogy from sound recording to help us understand transmission as a practice of artificial selection and emphasis. Let us imagine that I have made a selection from feminist archives, each artefact is inserted into a 64-channel recording. On playback, some of the channels are pulled up (emphasised) so they can be heard louder than others. This is an act of transmission that changes our degree of exposure to parts of the feminist archive. Because culture (even feminist culture) is organised on the premise of uneven transmission (some parts of the archive move across historical time more easily than others and are granted extended legitimacy and intelligibility), some channels need to be emphasised in the mix.⁴⁸ When the mix is played back (operationalized, performed, transmitted) following selections from the transmitter, the information trajectory may experience greater evenness, balance and accountability to a wider range of historical circumstances and actors.⁴⁹ Through such transmission practices, if widely socialised, previously under-emphasised parts of the archive may spread, condense and achieve stability. We will notice if this process is effective when things change, for example when texts from the British Black

Women's Movement form a consistent part of syllabuses.⁵⁰ The change may also be, is likely to be, less tangible, more akin to a change in values. Altering the concentration of the transmission through an act of emphasis may be understood as applying obfuscation to the historical record. Yet as I have stated, transmission is a historically uneven process, meaning that certain cultural forms acquire greater concentration and stability according to factors such ethnicity, geo-political location, gender, financial endorsement and state or civic interests that place them higher in 'the mix'. This means that the *actual amplitude* may well be balanced, or aspires to balance in *the long term*. Furthermore, as culture changes through the distribution of historical information, the mix can change; the mix is always necessarily contingent and adaptive. Each transmission is 'mixed' local to a situation, in accordance to the needs of the dominant transmission context. The example used in this article is the relative lack of access to the heritage of Black British women's movements; as well as historical condition—the inherited legacies of imperialism and white supremacy that shaped the tenor of politics of the WLM, and its aftermaths. Through transmission the balance of distributed historical information is always modified. Substantial change occurs when the emphasised parts of the mix achieve concentration, distribution and accrue acknowledged value, but this is never achieved once and for all. Transmission is always necessarily a site of struggle and contestation, be it on a personal or more macro political level; the mix has to be continually played and (re) adjusted. Transmission is a process; it can be studied, yes, but fore mostly it is *practiced*.

Transmitting the feminist archive

This article has explored how historical and heritage practices, although woven from the same archive material, can transmit that archive very differently. If the time has now come to historicise the WLM, as this special issue declares, we must also remember that there are other ways to interpret and transmit feminist archives. Moreover, these other interpretative practices exceed the writing of history as the only means to transmit historical records. As discussed above, throughout my curatorial work in *Sistershow Revisited* and *Music & Liberation* my aim was to appropriate the exhibition form in order to foreground contents of the feminist archive. It was a process whereby I organised, selected and emphasized feminist archive material relating the cultural histories of the WLM. I wanted exhibition visitors to encounter the different voices, energies, perspectives and material forms I had discovered through archival research. I wanted to construct encounters where identifications with the material displayed could potentially emerge. I was trying to engender among visitors a sense of (their) feminist heritage that may make them feel 'more whole as [feminist] people in a society that fragments, stereotypes and divides us.'⁵¹

My use of exhibition was also strategic because I felt it offered a wider platform for the expression of archival material. Sensitive to the way that common narrative tropes have come to compress recent feminist history, I was charmed by the way archival artefacts could carry their own stories within them. Artefacts, in this sense, invite interpretation because they appear as discontinuous or fragmented. They are, as Marina Warner suggests, open wounds.⁵² They cannot be digested or processed easily. It is my contention that those invested in the transmission of feminism's archive—be they historians or heritage practitioners—need to devise strategies to ensure the complexities of the material are attended to. The transmission of history, in

other words, is not always a healing or ‘smoothing over’ process, particularly when large, historically enacted wounds (i.e., systemic inequalities) remain open. Honouring those wounds may require elaborating alternative transmission models as I do in the final part of the essay. Although it may have seemed like a speculative and theoretical exercise, it aims to imagine the possibility where such interpretive practices—that is the ability to organise, select and emphasise the feminist archive—are widely socialized throughout society. Within such a context transmitting one’s history or heritage is not the purview of professionals or specialists, but a more fundamental part of how identities and communities, composed of selected inheritances, are constructed at a grassroots, everyday level. With such thoughts in mind, we can note that the archives of the WLM and the Black Women’s Movement offer us many resources, challenges and lessons to explore these possibilities.⁵³

¹ See for example Sarah Browne (2014) *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland, c.1968-c.1979*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

² The BBC series made by Vanessa Engle *Angry Wimin* (2007) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008431p/episodes/guide> and Women (2010) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00rgp.php>. Last accessed 2 October 2014.

³ In Conversation with the Women’s Liberation Movement: Intergenerational Histories of Second Wave Feminism event, held at the British Library 12 October 2013. <http://historyfeminism.wordpress.com/conference-2013/> Last accessed 2 October 2014.

⁴ For example the Feminist Libraries and Archives network is currently active <http://feministlibrariesandarchives.wordpress.com/>, while the activist work of the Feminist Activist Forum (2007-2009) was inspired by the history of the WLM, and desired to make connections with the activism of feminists at different points in history. You can access the FAF website on the wayback machine <http://web.archive.org/web/20080217212745/http://www.feministactivistforum.org.uk/index.htm>. Please note this is a text only capture of the website (i.e., not a verbatim representation of the site), last accessed 4 October 2014.

⁵ *Rapunzel, Let Down Your Hair* and *In Our Own Time* (1981) were shown at the *Translation/ Transmission* women’s film season (2014); translationtransmission.wordpress.com; Mary Kelly presented a screening of the *Nightcleaners* at Birkbeck on 29 November 2013, <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/mary-kelly-presents-nightcleaners-part-1-tickets-8757675443>.

⁶ Many of these events focus on a comparison of feminism then and now, or where ‘we’ were then, and where we are now. See for example the excellent discussion held at the LSE in January 2014 with Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Natalie Bennett, Camille Kumar, Finn Mackay, Pragna Patel and Professor Lynne Segal. Documented online: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2195>. Last accessed 2 October 2014.

⁷ See for example the Bolton Women’s Liberation Oral History project, <http://www.bolton-womens-liberation.org/>; *Sistershow Revisited*, <http://sistershowrevisited.wordpress.com>; *Unfinished Histories*, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com>, *Music & Liberation*, <http://music-and->

liberation.tumblr.com and the Women's Liberation Music Archive, <http://womensliberationmusicarchive.co.uk>, among others.

⁸ Raphael Samuel (2012/ 1996) *Theatres of Memory*, London: Verso, p. xxiii.

⁹ Laurajane Smith (2006) *The Uses of Heritage*, London: Routledge, p. 11.

¹⁰ David C. Harvey (2001) 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies' in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7: 4, pp. 319 - 338, p. 336.

¹¹ Hayden White 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality' *Critical Enquiry*, 7: 1, 5-27, 20-24, quoted in Victoria Browne (2014) *Feminism, Time and Non-Linear History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), 75-76.

¹² Geoffrey Cubitt (2007), *History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 181.

¹³ Laurajane Smith (2011) 'The "doing" of heritage: heritage as performance,' Jenny Kidd and Anthony Jackson, eds. *Performing heritage: Research, practice and innovation in museum theatre and live interpretation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 69-82, 71.

¹⁴ Kate Eichorn (2013) *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 54, my italics.

¹⁵ Margaretta Jolly (2008) *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*, New York: Columbia University, p. 20.

¹⁶ Of course there are exceptions, such as Sasha Roseneil (2000) *Common Women: Uncommon Practices*, London: Continuum.

¹⁷ Carly Guest (2013) Young women's narratives of becoming feminist: a multi-method study, PhD Thesis, Birkbeck; Sian Norris (2011) *The Lightbulb Moment: The stories of why we are feminists*, Bristol: Crooked Rib; Alex Brew's (2008) *Feminist Outings* played on the idea that one must come out as a feminist, reflecting also upon the ambiguous connotations of feminism and lesbian sexuality. See her website archived on the way back machine: http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100602065646/http://www.alexbrew.co.uk/gallery_150871.html. Last accessed 9 October 2014.

¹⁸ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998) *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Rachel Cooke (2008) 'Taking Women Off the Shelf' 2 April, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/06/fiction.features1>. Last accessed 28 October 2014.

²⁰ Jalna Hamner (2014) Transcript of Speech Given at the Feminist, Libraries and Archives session at the Feminism in London conference, Saturday 25 October 2014.

²¹ Women and Music Newsletter (1978) 'Our Own Music', p. 1. Italics mine.

²² Krista Cowman (2010) "'Carrying a Long Tradition" Second-Wave Presentations of First-Wave Feminism in Spare Rib c. 1972-80' in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 17: 3, pp. 193-210, p. 198.

²³ Ibid, p. 202.

²⁴ Ibid, my italics.

²⁵ Laura Mayhall (2005) Creating the 'Suffrage Spirit': British Feminism and the Historical Imagination in Burton Antoinette ed. (2005) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and Writings of History*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 232-251.

²⁶ June Purvis (2014) 'The March of the Women' in *History Today*, November, p. 5.

²⁷ Cowman (2010) "'Carrying a Long Tradition,'" p. 203.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 204.

²⁹ Jussi Parikka (ed) *Digital Memory and the Archive: Wolfgang Ernst*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

³⁰ Wendy Chun (2011) 'The Enduring Ephemeral, or, The Future Is a Memory' in Erik Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 184-207

³¹ Gail Lewis (2011) Interviewed by Rachel Cohen as part of Sisterhood & After. <http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiirsi/?ps=dftkoGSvHL/WORKS-FILE/97220073/9>. Transcribed by the author from the audio file.

³² Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: Visual Identification and the Visual Arts* (London: Routledge, 2012), 193. This process of identification and dis-identification Amelia Jones names 'queer feminist durationality' (193).

³³ Frank Ankersmit (2005) *Sublime historical experience*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 369.

³⁴ Eelco Runia (2006) 'Spots of Time', *History and Theory*, 45: 3, pp. 305-316, p. 316.

³⁵ Clare Hemmings (2011) *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press.

³⁶ Deborah Withers (2015) *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission: Theory, Practice and Cultural Heritage*, London: Rowman Littlefield International; Iris Van der Tuin (2014) *Generational Feminism*, New York: Lexington.

³⁷ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters (2014) *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*, London: I.B. Tauris, p. 22.

³⁸ Rebecca Schneider (2011) *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London: Routledge.

³⁹ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*.

⁴⁰ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 180; Withers, *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission*.

⁴¹ Bernard Stiegler (1998) *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 207.

⁴² Bernard Stiegler (2014) *Symbolic Misery: Vol. 1, The Hyperindustrial Epoch*. trans. Barnaby Norman, Basingstoke: Polity, 12.

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu (1986) *Distinction*, London: Routledge.

⁴⁴ Claire Colebrook (2015) 'Impossible and Unprincipled: On Bernard Stiegler,' available online, https://www.academia.edu/13208007/Impossible_and_Unprincipled_On_Bernard_Stiegler.

⁴⁵ See also Heidi Mirza (2014) 'Black British Feminism: Then and Now' in *Media Diversified*, March 23. Available online: <http://mediadiversified.org/2014/03/23/black-british-feminism-then-and-now/>. Last accessed 23 October 2014.

⁴⁶ Yula Burin and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski 'sister to sister: developing a Black feminist archival consciousness' *Feminist Review*, 2014, 108, p. 118.

⁴⁷ To explore the FAS catalogue go to <http://oac.lib.bris.ac.uk/DServe/>. Last accessed 30 October 2014.

⁴⁸ While it is impossible to reduce the extent of feminist cultural heritage to sonic forms alone, I have used sound as an example here because it neatly communicates

my analogy through a visual graphic. Sound is also profoundly relational, not only felt as vibrations but also potentially absorbed by the body.

⁴⁹ A transmissive circuit could three people reading listening to the Wilmette Brown tape and discussing it, but it can also be a website hosting that same recording, making it available to a potentially very large transmission circuit. Within such contexts 'transmission [...] is the essence of education. What is education in this sense? Education is *the relation between diverse generations*, and contact is its mode of transmission.' Bernard Stiegler and Irit Rogoff (2010) 'Transindividuation', *e-flux* 14, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/transindividuation/>. Last accessed 26 January 2015.

⁵⁰ Gail Lewis, 'Black Feminist Texts,' *Sisterhood and After*, 2013, accessed 25 March, 2015, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/view.html#id=143433&id2=143140>.

⁵¹ Women and Music Newsletter, 'Our Own Music', p. 1.

⁵² Marina Warner 'Unhealing Time' in *Table of Contents: Memory and Presence*, London: Siobhan Davies Dance, 6-15, 10-12.

⁵³ For Shannon Woodcock.